

Townsend-area farmers receive New Castle Conservation District's Cooperator of Year Award



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TOWNSEND – Norman and Gwen Pierce, owners of Union Ridge Farms near Townsend, are the recipients of the New Castle Conservation District's Cooperator of the Year Award, presented annually to a farmer in the district who has exhibited a high degree of interest in conservation for their farm operation. The Pierces, who are Delaware natives, have implemented a conservation plan that addresses concerns with soil, water, air, plants and animal resources, and have addressed those resource concerns through technical and financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the New Castle Conservation District.

The Pierces have a farm background but did not begin their current enterprise of raising Boer goats until 2006. They raise approximately 30 animals per year on their five-acre operation. Some of the does are sold for meat while others are sold as breeding stock or to become show goats. The goats have

two breeding cycles per year and usually have twins and triplets. They reach 65-70 pounds within four to five months. Besides rearing goats, the Pierces also raise rabbits and bobwhite quail.

To improve their farming operation, the Pierces asked for assistance from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the New Castle Conservation District. To improve overall drainage on the property, an existing ditch was redone and a new culvert pipe installed. Existing pastures were rejuvenated using a combination of warm and cool season grasses and milk vetch to provide for both grazing and hay production. The milk vetch will continue to grow through the winter months.

A rotational grazing program also was put into place with new fencing and two animal watering devices to make water accessible from Union Ridge Farms' four pastures. The goats are rotated through the four pastures every 10-20 days. This gives the first pasture 30-60 days to rest and recover. Since installing these conservation practices in the fall of 2013, the Pierces have seen a great improvement in their operation, pasture quality and animal health. Beyond help the Pierces have gotten from NCCD and USDA, the University of Delaware Cooperative Extension Service has also provided invaluable assistance and advice for their farming operation.

The Pierces have hosted two goat seminars at their farm and two at the Southern States farm store in Middletown. They are also involved in a de-wormer study being conducted by Delaware State University based on pumpkin seed – trying to find natural methods to de-worm the goats. Ultimately, the Pierces would like to add more acreage to their farm to increase the number of goats they can raise.

The Pierces were also recently honored as minority farmers of the year in Delaware by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service with a featured article in Minority

Farmer magazine.

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